

Chile's native groups decry discrimination on Day of Indigenous Resistance



Santiago de Chile, October 13 (RHC)-- Thousands of protesters on Saturday marched in Chile's capital, Santiago, denouncing discrimination against the country's indigenous peoples amid the annual commemorations for the Day of Indigenous Resistance.

Protesters brought downtown Santiago de Chile to a standstill as they rallied for the release of detained activists facing prosecution for campaigning against extractive industries, including logging and copper mining, on indigenous lands.

The crowds also called for greater rights for indigenous people and the return of ancestral lands seized by the Chilean government and sold off to farmers and forestry companies in the past.

The demonstration came on Columbus Day, as it is known in the European and Western media. The day is a national holiday that commemorates Christopher Columbus' arrival to the Americas in 1492. Indigenous people, however, mark it as the beginning of their resistance against European colonialism. The Day of Indigenous Resistance is officially known as the Day of the Meeting of Two Worlds in Chile.

Saturday's march began with a small ceremony on a grassy patch of the central Plaza Italia, with a female shaman scattering dried corn as she prayed for protection. Onlookers blew animal horns, stamped sticks of bamboo on the ground and waved sprigs of the sacred Canelo tree.

Then, Belen Curamil, daughter of an indigenous leader detained for his activism against the construction of a dam in the Araucania region read out a letter from her father. "Today we reaffirm that there is nothing to celebrate on these dates, but that we must make visible all the resistance that the community has made to the attacks of destruction that are being carried out by large national and international companies in our territory," the letter from Alberto Curamil said.

"We're not here to celebrate the discovery of Columbus but actually the moment when we were invaded. We want to make ourselves visible and to show that we're still alive," said 41-year-old Jenifer Farias.

Manuel Rojas, dressed in a costume depicting a giant child, said he was marching in solidarity with his wife and children who are indigenous. "I'm wearing this for the repression that is happening to children in Mapuche communities, because they suffer the most," he said, referring to police raids that some communities say have traumatised their children.

Some two million Chileans, or 10 percent of the population, identify as indigenous. The Mapuche are the largest indigenous group. In recent years, relations between the Chilean government and the Mapuche has become increasingly tense because of mining and logging on land which the group claim as its own.

The Chilean government has cast branded the indigenous as "terrorists," prosecuting them through a Pinochet-era anti-terror law, even though United Nations experts have urged Chile to refrain from using the legislation against Mapuche people seeking to claim their rights.

"Our way is to let the land rest and not to exploit it, to fight against farming monoculture and mineral extraction and to protest the building of hydroelectric dams," said Mapuche historian Claudio Alvarado Lincopi.

"Our philosophy means that we do not believe that individual or governments can own the land." Daniela Millaleo, a 34-year-old Mapuche singer, said she was marching to celebrate "the simple fact of being alive."

"We are the descendants of those that they couldn't kill."

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